

Suburbanization and Mass Culture in North America

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REVIEW ESSAYS / NOTES CRITIQUES

Suburbanization and Mass Culture in North America

Donica Belisle

Richard Harris, *Creeping Conformity: How Canada Became Suburban, 1900-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2004)

L.B. Kuffert, *A Great Duty: Canadian Responses to Modern Life and Mass Culture, 1939-1967* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 2003)

Robert Lewis, ed., *Manufacturing Suburbs: Building Work and Home on the Metropolitan Fringe* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2004)

AFTER THE HEADY DAYS of citizen engagement that characterized World War II, North Americans retreated from a public sphere of active citizenship and embraced a private world of domesticity, conformity, and materialism. Previously urbane citizens moved to the suburbs where they lived in identical houses, drove identical cars, and watched identical television programs. Retiring to comfortable domestic interiors, their interests in politics, culture, and society disappeared.

Or so it is commonly asserted. Three new books test these theories, offering useful analyses of suburbanization, industrialization, and modernity. Together they deepen our understanding of how government and business orchestrate living arrangements and cultural productions. While focusing on the 1850s to 1960s, the authors speak to contemporary struggles to achieve fulfillment and equality in an age

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that has grown more cynical of the modernist equation of progress with achievement.

In *Creeping Conformity*, Richard Harris traces the rise of the contemporary automobile-dominated and corporate-financed Canadian suburb. Although some exclusive suburban enclaves existed in Montreal and Toronto during the later 1800s, suburbs did not become widespread in Canada until the 20th century. During the 1910s the streetcar and the urban population boom encouraged people to move from city centres and rural locations to the urban fringe. From this period through the 1930s, four types of developments characterized the Canadian suburban landscape: wealthy, elite communities; middle-class districts; industrial suburbs; and “shacktowns.” Located far from cities and usually in unserved areas, shacktowns were working-class communities in which most owners had, often over the space of several years, built their own homes.

In the thirties and forties, the federal government suppressed suburban diversity and promoted the middle-class standardized suburb. The Dominion Housing Act [DHA] of 1935, renamed the National Housing Act [NHA] in 1938, enabled lenders to offer mortgages backed by DHA insurance. Since the NHA would only provide mortgage insurance to lenders of which it approved, the NHA gave the government control over which types of lenders could provide housing loans. Not wishing to lose government insurance, lenders provided mortgages only on places and to individuals deemed low risk. Such places were serviced and such people were affluent; hence the NHA discriminated against low-income Canadians. In 1946 the state placed the NHA under the purview of a new crown corporation called the Central (now Canada) Mortgage Housing Corporation [CMHC], and in 1954 it revised the Bank Act to allow chartered banks to enter the mortgage field. Both actions indicated the government’s belief that corporations provided the best route for suburban development.

The introduction of a National Building Code cemented the rise of the standardized, corporate suburb. During the 1940s the state introduced requirements that mandated “basic services,” “street widths,” “building materials,” and so on. (123) The Code spurred builders and investors to favour affluent homeowners, for these were the ones who could purchase homes that met guidelines. They also encouraged developers to operate on larger scales. Rather than waiting for municipalities to provide services, developers began purchasing huge land tracts and installing the services themselves. As the developers grew, they adopted an assembly-line approach to construction. They divided land into various subdivisions, developing one subdivision at a time. Employing different groups of labourers to perform different tasks, they constructed several houses simultaneously. Using standardized plans, mass construction created a “cookie-cutter” style of house appearance and layout. By the 1960s the corporate system — large developers, standardized plans, and long-term bank mortgages — dominated suburban growth.

Wealthy enclaves continued to exist, but industrial suburbs and shacktowns gave way to the middle-class style of development.

The best chapter of *Creeping Conformity* is its last. Stepping back from the book's narrative of suburban change, it explores the continuities, changes, and effects of suburbanization. In Harris's estimation, middle-class people had always valued privacy and consumer goods, but prior to the 1920s working people preferred community-oriented, front-street living; they also valued thrift. As they became more affluent in the twenties and especially the fifties, though, workers adopted more consumerist — and hence, according to Harris, more middle-class — lifestyles. Working and professional men's lives turned inward. As houses and lots grew, men spent more time on hobbies than they did going to saloons and clubs.

In Harris's view, the particular roads that Canada took toward suburbanization had undesirable consequences. The unplanned shacktowns of the 1910s through 1930s may have promoted diversity, but because they had poor sewer and water services, they also created health hazards. The entire period's orientation toward children and family life was and remains short-sighted: after the children of new suburbs grow up, elementary schools become superfluous, and little infrastructure is built for adolescent and adult recreation. The NHA and the National Building Code discriminated against low-income owners, and the corporate suburbs promoted standardization. Lack of planning around mass transit encouraged ever-widening, auto-induced sprawl. Finally, because new homes were and are expensive and require new goods and services, owners have encumbered themselves with debt.

Though many of *Creeping Conformity's* examples focus on Hamilton, the book is peppered with references to Vancouver, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Halifax, and Montreal. The book hence provides a satisfactory overview of the Canadian scene. Harris provides useful comparisons of Canadian suburbanization with the United States and Western Europe, enabling readers to situate Canadian suburbanization in international context and evaluate alternative modes of development. Harris's detailed explorations of the classed nature of suburban development are noteworthy, as are his briefer expeditions into the gendered division of labour that suburbanization enforced. As part of the University of Toronto Press's *Themes in Canadian History* series, the book is aimed at a general and undergraduate audience, and Harris succeeds in making his book informative and engaging. Nonetheless the book does tend to over-generalize. Chapter Two, an overview of Canadian suburbs between 1900 and 1960, skims over detailed chronological information. This leaves the reader wondering what changes took place between 1900 and 1960. Another difficulty is the book's tendency to repeat particular points and examples. Pages 93 and 110 both discuss shacktown-dwellers' emerging inability to pay municipal taxes for services.

Creeping Conformity's strongest contribution is Harris's discussion of stereotypes of the suburbs as standardized, conservative, and consumerist. After World

War II, he notes, Canadian suburbs did become all of these things. Yet such developments proceeded unevenly. Even as the suburbs became more standardized, homeowners did take steps, largely through do-it-yourself home improvement projects, to personalize their dwellings. And even though home ownership encouraged conservatism, it is important to look at why suburbanites became conservative. Because homes are such major investments, owners were concerned to maintain property values in their areas. This encouraged them to resist change. Finally, suburbanites do have consumerist lifestyles. But, argues Harris, it is crucial to understand that consumerism extends beyond the suburbs. Coffee chains are located on city corners; and shopping malls are located in the urban core. Unlike critics who attack suburbanization without trying to understand why it exists, Harris takes one step further, exploring the motivations behind people's decisions to move to the suburbs as well as behind state and business decisions regarding suburban planning.

While *Creeping Conformity* is aimed at the general reader, *Manufacturing Suburbs* targets the specialized scholar. A collection of ten articles, not including the introduction, documenting the rise of industrial suburbs in the United States and Canada between 1850 and 1950, *Manufacturing Suburbs* assumes the reader is familiar with historical and geographical literature on suburbanization and industrialization. The collection has three purposes: to gather together recent literature on industrial suburbanization, to demonstrate that the movement of industry has often initiated suburbanization, and to pinpoint directions for further industrial suburbanization research.

Most of the readings in the collection chart the movement of industry within particular metropolitan regions prior to 1950. Baltimore, Chicago, Montreal, the San Francisco Bay, Pittsburgh, Toronto, southern California, and Detroit constitute the focus of the collection's eight case studies. In these areas, industries moved to the urban fringe from central city locations as well as other regions. Rationale for relocation differed according to locale and industry, but in general, industries moved outward to acquire more space for their growing operations, to be closer to rivers and railways, and to get away from maturing industrial workforces. Sometimes, as was the case with Henry Ford in Detroit, employers moved outward to offer better housing opportunities for workers as well as to deepen workers' dependence on particular consumer goods, in his case automobiles. Most often the movement of industry precipitated the growth of housing, services, and other infrastructure on the urban fringe. One exception was Toronto. There, manufacturers tended to stay within city limits. According to contributor Gunter Gad, the city of Toronto had enough space to accommodate the growing needs of manufacturers.

The authors in *Manufacturing Suburbs* urge readers to reconsider their perceptions about how cities expand. Asserting that historians have spent too much time studying residential suburbs and not enough time studying industrial ones, they suggest that most people assume that suburban growth has been driven by the de-

sires of white-collar workers to escape urban congestion. Buying detached homes on the urban fringe, and commuting downtown by streetcar and later the automobile, the middle class led the exodus out of the city. Showing that large-scale industry, in tandem with local governments and real estate developers, played a major role in urban growth prior to 1950, *Manufacturing Suburbs* offers an important corrective to this narrative. Bringing the rise of corporate capitalism and vertically integrated industry to the foreground of suburbanization scholarship, this collection demonstrates that suburbanization is a complicated process, driven as much by the logic of capitalist accumulation as by the cultural proclivities of professionals and the bourgeoisie.

Most of the readings in *Manufacturing Suburbs* focus on how and why manufacturers in particular cities moved to outlying areas. This approach allows the authors to track the expansion of industry during a specific period as well as offer fresh perspectives on old understandings of urban geography. Mary Beth Pudup's article on industrial growth in Chicago targets the received wisdom of the Chicago School itself. During the early 20th century a group of social scientists, using Chicago as their model, postulated that cities grow outward in "tidy zones of similar land use" from a "central core area." (54) Studying the movement of industry within Chicago at the turn of the 20th century, Pudup demonstrates instead that industry moved outward in a "multinucleated" pattern. She also reveals that "real estate professionals" influenced decisions about where industrialists located. (54) In this way she demonstrates that models of urban development that do not take into account the wishes of historical agents are rigid and ahistorical.

If the book's focus on industrial movement within particular regions illuminates neglected corners of history, obscures others. In his introduction Lewis suggests that industrial districts housed "working-class and immigrant populations," (9) but most of the authors make only passing references to how industrial relocation affected working people. For this reason Heather B. Barrow's contribution is the best article in *Manufacturing Suburbs*. Demonstrating that Detroit's three big automakers — GM, Chrysler, and Ford — moved most of their operations from downtown Detroit to suburban locations during the interwar period, she shows that this movement had a major effect on the city's social composition. Paying particular attention to Henry Ford's reasons for relocating, Barrow makes visible the financial decisions prompting industrialists to shift their operating zones. Ford wanted to pay lower taxes; he also wanted to play a greater role in municipal decision-making.

As the "Big Three" moved out of the city, suburban conditions blossomed. Home and automobile ownership rates grew, streets were paved and widened, educational and recreational facilities appeared, and large industrial tax bases enriched municipal coffers. Automobile production wages sustained most of this growth, as almost half of Detroit's suburban population worked in this industry. At the same time, the loss of the automobile industry, and the jobs that went with it, wrought

devastating effects upon central Detroit. Rents stayed high but housing conditions declined. Office buildings closed, fashion districts relocated, and wealthy urbanites moved to suburban enclaves. Until World War II downtown remained a popular destination for people looking for skills and jobs. Nonetheless, as jobs kept moving out the city, slum areas expanded. And in response, beginning in the 1940s the population of urban Detroit began to decline.

Richard Harris shows in *Creeping Conformity* that the common perception of the suburb as a standardized, sprawling site of *embourgeoisement* arose in the immediate postwar years. This is because many suburbs of this period did fit that description. Yet even though Canadian and American suburbs are now more diverse, the 1950s identification of suburbanization with consumerism and conservatism is still prevalent today. For this reason both *Creeping Conformity* and *Manufacturing Suburbs* spend much time addressing these stereotypes. The former holds up notions about suburbanization to historical scrutiny, demonstrating that during the interwar years many Canadian suburbs were diverse; some were even radical. The latter argues that 1950s-style stereotypes of suburbs as complacent and conformist have had a detrimental influence on suburbanization scholarship. This influence is especially visible in studies that claim that American suburbanization prior to 1950 was led by middle-class homeowners.

Len Kuffert's book, *A Great Duty*, not only responds to mid-century ideas about consumerism and conservatism but puts them under intense scrutiny. Whereas *Creeping Conformity* and *Manufacturing Suburbs* address such themes so as to illuminate suburbanization history, *A Great Duty* focuses on the notion that North American life was materialist and conformist so as to illuminate Canadian culture at mid-century. Though Kuffert does not look at suburbanization, his analyses contribute to our understanding of urban expansion because they foreground the concerns of those who spoke out against the perceived homogenizing and materialist tendencies of North American culture.

During World War II, Canadians working in academia, broadcasting, journalism, and other opinion-making professions promoted a particular vision of postwar Canada. Desiring a peacetime nation characterized by citizenry active in political decision-making, artistic production, literary pursuits, and philosophical endeavours, they held up the values of liberalism, individuality, and democracy. Then, in the immediate postwar years, critics saw their dreams of active citizenship and vibrant cultural production unravel. Happy to live in peace and security, middle- and working-class Canadians turned toward the pleasures of business-driven mass culture. Comfortable domestic furnishings, movies, comic strips, automobiles, entertaining radio programs, spectator sports, and department stores captured more of Canadians' time and money than did edifying pursuits like small craft production, book reading, and museum going. To halt this trend, cultural critics urged the creation of community centres: if Canadians took craft and drama classes in their own communities, they would become more critically engaged.

If some critics exercised themselves over for-profit entertainment, others believed science and technology were negative influences. They recognized that science had played a crucial role in the Allied victory, but they also saw the atomic bomb as evidence of a difference between the pursuit of science in the service of human experience, and the pursuit of science for its own sake. Christian leaders revived the creationist-evolutionist debate, using it to demonstrate that science could not speak to metaphysical matters. In the fifties and sixties, critics also began bemoaning the growing influence of technology. Sure, they said, technology creates new products — but what is the purpose of such products? They suggested human endeavour might better be directed toward pressing political and social quandaries.

Cultural criticism of the 1940s and early 1950s tended toward elitism. Believing that art, literature, politics, and creative leisure pursuits were better than mass culture, critics had a difficult time understanding why most Canadians preferred to spend their spare time shopping, going to movies, and reading comic books. In the late 1950s and especially the 1960s, though, critics began relaxing their attitudes toward Canadians' cultural choices. Since they believed strongly in democracy, they respected Canadians' rights to pick their own entertainments. The most notable development during this time was a growing connection between non-commodified cultural production and Canadian-ness. Critics began identifying mass culture, with all its profit-seeking and garish qualities, as American, and they began seeing Canadian culture as mass culture's opposite: it was folksy and authentic. Yet because critics recognized that many Canadians liked aspects of mass culture, particularly its spectating qualities, they did incorporate mass cultural elements into their own cultural productions.

A Great Duty is an original contribution to Canadian historiography. Kuffert's subject is unique, as is the way Kuffert blends intellectual history with empirical analysis. Putting under the microscope middle-class Canadians' discomfort with the forces of homogenization, Kuffert analyses strains of English Canadian thought that continue to influence the approaches of contemporary academics, including historians, to their subjects. The notion that mass culture encourages conformity, for instance, appears in recent Canadian works in consumer history. Revealing the origins of particular English Canadian cultural concerns, Kuffert provides English Canadian humanities and social science scholars with a history of some of their own interests.

Attention to gender would enhance *A Great Duty*. Kuffert identifies two important binaries within mid-century cultural criticism: active versus passive, and autonomous versus enslaved. Feminist historians have noted similar binaries in studies of citizenship and consumption. Interestingly, theorists in these areas have sometimes identified active and autonomous citizenship as masculine, and passive and enslaved citizenship and culture, particularly mass culture, as feminine. With some exceptions, the cultural critics of whom Kuffert speaks were men; perhaps their writings on citizenship and autonomy were influenced by pressures to con-

form to prevailing ideals of independent, virile masculinity. The illustration included on the cover of *A Great Duty* supports this assessment. Featuring a man and a woman at a football game, the woman's face is turned toward the reader's but the man's is turned away. The woman is excited, smiling, and waving a cigarette. The woman therefore represents mass culture, and its various transgressions. Because we cannot see the man's face, his position is more ambiguous.

Unlike *Creeping Conformity* and *Manufacturing Suburbs*, *A Great Duty* does not undertake class analysis. Discussion of class would have deepened its portrayal of mid-century culture. Most of the cultural critics in *A Great Duty* held professional positions. They thus could afford the products of the mass entertainment industries. During this period, working-class Canadians occupied more stringent positions. The postwar years witnessed rising worker affluence, but economic security was new for many Canadians at this time. Since middle-class cultural critics could afford to participate in mass culture, they could also afford to be *blasé* toward it. Working people may not have experienced the same sense of ennui. For some, mass culture may have represented all that they could not afford during the Depression. Participation in mass culture may have symbolized a sense of economic and social arrival. *A Great Duty* therefore answers questions about culture in mid-century Canada as well as opens up new ones. Why did more Canadians embrace mass culture rather than high- and middle-brow culture?

Whereas *Creeping Conformity*'s argument tends toward repetition, *A Great Duty* would benefit from more analytical clarity. Though Kuffert does point out that English-Canadian cultural criticism evolved over the first half of the 20th century, the book's chronology portrays the 1940s as cultural criticism's originating years. As well, although *A Great Duty* makes original contributions to Canadian historiography, these contributions are not highlighted. More discussion of the book's themes and findings would emphasize the book's importance and place it in a broader context. Elimination of typos on pages 22, 83, 186, 204, 219, and 220 would further enhance the text.

Taking different approaches to conformity, standardization, consumerism, and mass culture, *Creeping Conformity*, *Manufacturing Suburbs*, and *A Great Duty* enrich our understanding of 20th-century suburbanization, development, and culture. Showing the postwar years ushered in unprecedented concerns about standardization, passivity, and materialism, the authors demonstrate that suburbanization has not always meant standardization, that suburbanization encompassed both industrial and residential movement, and that mid-century criticisms about mass culture emerged from fears about passivity, commodification, and cultural control.

At their best, these works reveal the continuing influence of capitalist expansion within North American life. At mid-century Canadian suburbs became more and more standardized and exclusionary because the Canadian state decided to follow a corporate model of development. During the interwar years downtown De-

troit crumbled because the Big Three decided to move to the suburbs. After World War II Canadian cultural critics began to believe that authentic Canadian culture was that which was not commodified. These three books remind us that while it is important to think critically about consumerist and conformist lifestyles, it is equally important to recognize the logics of capitalist development that underwrite their existence.



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